



Commonwealth of Kentucky
Justice & Public Safety Cabinet

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**Medical examination finds that natural causes led to tragic death at
Lincoln Village Detention Center**

FRANKFORT, Ky. (March 16, 2016) – Medical examiners have determined that a teenage girl who passed away at Lincoln Village Detention Center died in her sleep from an irregular heartbeat, Kentucky Justice Secretary John Tilley reported today.

Following up on his commitment to transparency, Secretary Tilley provided an update on three separate investigations, including an autopsy that ruled out trauma and injury as contributing factors in the Jan. 11 tragedy.

“I remain saddened by this loss and want to extend my heartfelt prayers and sympathies to the family,” Secretary Tilley said. “I’ve pledged from the beginning that we will spare no resources in determining what happened to this young lady and act swiftly to address and correct any misconduct at Lincoln Village. Today, all evidence points to natural causes.”

The Secretary, who took office in late December, also ordered release of surveillance video from inside the facility to the family. The family will receive a full copy of the footage – totaling about 60 hours – once Kentucky State Police closes its investigation.

“The Department of Juvenile Justice has never released video from inside a facility, however this tragedy warrants special consideration,” Secretary Tilley said. “We want to be as open and responsive as possible to give this family the answers they deserve.”

The Kentucky Medical Examiners Office, State Police and the Internal Investigations Branch for the Justice and Public Safety Cabinet have headed up independent inquiries.

After an exhaustive review, medical examiners can now attribute the death to a sudden cardiac arrhythmia, which occurred overnight while the youth was sleeping on her bunk.

They found that she passed away without exhibiting any apparent distress on surveillance video from inside the cell.

In addition, the renowned Mayo Medical Laboratories performed an independent genetic test, revealing evidence of a rare condition – known as Inherited Long QT Syndrome – that can cause irregular heart rhythms and sudden death despite an outwardly healthy appearance.

Medical examiners also found no evidence of lethal blunt force injury or asphyxiation. Nine other board-certified forensic pathologists, one pediatric pathologist, and one cardiac pathologist have all reviewed the autopsy and concurred with the findings.

Chief Medical Examiner William C. Ralston said youths at risk of sudden cardiac arrhythmia may never exhibit any signs or symptoms beforehand, and that doctors are not always able to prevent such problems from turning fatal, even in the hospital.

“Our deepest sympathies go out to the grieving family and those close to them,” Dr. Ralston said. “While such deaths are rare, genetic testing has provided a solid medical explanation in this instance, and I am confident in our conclusions.”

Investigators also performed a careful review of a restraint procedure that was used to help search the youth during intake and found it played no role in the death.

Surveillance video shows the youth walking through the facility and interacting with staff multiple times over the course of several hours following the procedure.

Likewise, Kentucky State Police has uncovered no evidence of foul play in the death. The investigation is nearing completion, and findings have been presented to prosecutors for review.

Secretary Tilley also announced today decisive action to address a pattern of employee misconduct that came to light amid investigations at Lincoln Village.

The Internal Investigations Branch identified six employees who failed to complete regular bed checks and falsified information on the logs.

One of those employees was terminated last month. Two more remain on special investigative leave. Three others are facing suspension, though one has already resigned.

“I am deeply troubled by the staff misconduct at Lincoln Village,” Secretary Tilley said. “We are taking proactive steps to root out this type of behavior in juvenile justice. For those employees who choose to abuse their position and work by their own rules, the consequences will be swift and certain.”

Secretary Tilley said the Justice Cabinet will use the investigations to shape reforms moving forward. This process will include a comprehensive examination of policies and procedures along with a review of employee performance.

The Cabinet also will enlist an external organization to conduct a similar review and recommend reforms, he said.

“We will approach these issues with the same sincerity and intensity that led to the recent reforms in Kentucky’s juvenile code,” Secretary Tilley said. “I pledge that over the coming months, we will take very deliberate and forward thinking steps to ensure our youths are kept safe and that our facilities are well run.”

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